# Boaters and surfers called Dial-A-Buoy for 27 years. Now NOAA is hanging it up.

The phone service has offered potentially life-saving coastal weather and water information to both mariners and surfers

By Dan Stillman

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A buoy from NOAA's Chesapeake Bay Interpretive Buoy System. (NOAA)

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It's the last call for Dial-A-Buoy, a longtime phone service that has provided hundreds of thousands of callers with potentially lifesaving coastal weather and water information.

The toll-free system, launched by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 1997 as a resource for those away from a computer or the internet, will be retired as of Sunday "due to the low volume of users and the cost to retain the service," the agency announced earlier this year.

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For the last 27 years, Dial-A-Buoy has been there rain or shine, day or night.

Boaters and surfers — or anyone seeking the reassuring comfort of a computerized female voice — could count on it to hear the latest observations from hundreds of buoys and coastal stations around the world.

Dial-A-Buoy outlasted many local weather lines, Sports Phone and even Moviefone but knows its time has come. After dialing 888-701-8992 or 301-713-9620, callers are immediately greeted with a terse goodbye: "Please be aware this service will be discontinued after March 16th, 2024."

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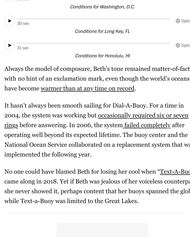
*Dial-a-buoy greeting*

The "attractive-sounding" automated voice of Dial-A-Buoy is named "Beth," according to NOAA's National Data Buoy Center, which operates the service. Users are not calling in to actual buoys, the buoy center admits, but tapping into a computer that brings in their data; the service also provides marine forecasts.

When prompted, the caller enters a five-character station identifier, or latitude and longitude, to which Beth dutifully replies with the requested data.

Dial-A-Buoy has helped boaters decide "whether it is safe to venture out" and surfers "to see if wave conditions are, or will soon be, promising. Many of these boaters and surfers live well inland, and knowing the conditions has saved them many wasted trips to the coast," the buoy center wrote. "Some even claim that the reports have saved lives."




(NOAA)

Shortly after its inception, Dial-A-Buoy received an average of 700 calls per day. In recent years, though, the average daily calls have dropped to fewer than 150, according to usage data provided by NOAA, as access to satellite internet options at sea have continued to expand.

"Dial-A-Buoy was once a necessary service that allowed mariners access to lifesaving buoy observations," Maureen O'Leary, a NOAA spokeswoman, said in an email. The buoy center's website "is a more reliable, efficient and cost-effective way to access those observations."

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## A tribute to Beth

In the waning days of Beth's impressive run, she was still going strong, seemingly unfazed by her impending demise.

On a recent call, she reported a wave height of 14.4 feet at Station 46014 off the Northern California coast, where gusty winds were churning up rough seas, and a frigid air temperature of minus-3.1 degrees at Station GBXA2 in the Bering Sea. She also reported a toasty water temperature of 77.2 degrees at Station 41139 in the middle of the tropical Atlantic Ocean, and an even warmer water temperature of 87.1 degrees at Station 14049 in the Indian Ocean.

30 sec Options

*Conditions for Washington, D.C.*

30 sec Options

*Conditions for Long Key, FL*

31 sec Options

*Conditions for Honolulu, HI*

Always the model of composure, Beth's tone remained matter-of-fact, with no hint of an exclamation mark, even though the world's oceans have become warmer than at any time on record.

It hasn't always been smooth sailing for Dial-A-Buoy. For a time in 2014, the system was working but occasionally required six or seven rings before answering. In 2006, the system failed completely after operating well beyond its expected lifetime. The buoy center and the National Ocean Service collaborated on a replacement system that was implemented the following year.

No one could have blamed Beth for losing her cool when "Text-A-Buoy" came along in 2018. Yet if Beth was jealous of her voiceless counterpart, she never showed it, perhaps content that her buoys spanned the globe, while Text-a-Buoy was limited to the Great Lakes.

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As the end of the line nears, Beth will remain as unflappable as always. But what about us? Are we ready for the end of an era?

Whether you're headed out on the water, or just a bit lonely, there's still time for a final call. As @CaptainJonesey once said on Twitter, before it became X, "Everyone should try dial-a-buoy at least once in their life."

We've always known how to quit Dial-A-Buoy: Simply hang up. Soon, we'll learn how it feels when Dial-A-Buoy quits on us.

11 sec Options

*Dial-A-Buoy menu*

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